

# THE LION IN WINTERS

*Irving Layton at York*

*David O'Rourke*

**I**T IS FREQUENTLY POINTED out with some degree of disparagement that a large number of Canadian poets are also university teachers. The people who are concerned with this phenomenon, most not employed by universities, argue that an academic appointment ranges in the vicinity of dangerous to insidious. They worry that the established Canadian poet will become "too soft." They fear that this country's poetry will become "too academic." They are of the opinion that the true poet ought to be "on the street" and "with the people." Sitting in cafés, they lament their brothers and sisters with university chairs. The fact that their own poetry is often not that good seems inconsequential; that students may be considered "of the people" — irrelevant; that university employment does not preclude contact with "the street" — beside the point; and, finally, that established poets might rebel against the "academic poetry" — not quite conceivable.

Still, there is some cause for the hysteria. A poet employed by a university does run the risk of realizing any of these forecasts. So might a poet employed by a bank. Fortunately, these people tend to be cognizant of the situation and usually guard against it. Less aware of the "dangers," however, may be the potential, or aspiring, young poets coming through the school system. Of those who make it to university, most can thank one good high school teacher. But, once arrived, these students are likely to find English classes run like laboratories, critics talking like scientists, and the skilled technician at the head of the room looking down upon the concept of a creative writing programme. Poems are then submitted to microscopic analysis and the poets, who are given to esoteric articles, placed on pedestals. While this may sound facetious to an academic audience, a "layman" looking on would not think it so humorous.

This, regrettably, is the area in which the established Canadian poet finds himself. Often frowned upon by his colleagues, the people who continue to dismiss Canadian Literature courses, the established poet is able to offer a different perspective to those young people running the gauntlet of university ranks. He tends to be supportive of creative writing, a touch cynical of the academic process, and frequently more informed about the art of poetry than a number of the depart-

mental specialists. Louis Dudek is one example: influential in having taught or first published Daryl Hine, Leonard Cohen, Michael Gnarowski, David Solway, Pierre Coupey, Seymour Mayne, and Peter Van Toorn. Earle Birney, Frank Davey, D. G. Jones, Ralph Gustafson, and Fred Cogswell also deserve attention as educators who have helped, and continue to aid, creative writing in this country. Yet another poet comes to mind: ranting and raging and telling everyone that he knows what's best, a natural teacher — Irving Layton.

**F**OR APPROXIMATELY HALF his life, Layton has taught in educational institutions ranging from parochial school to university. For the period from 1969 to 1978, he was located at York University, concluding one of his most productive periods as a poet in Winters College. Students expecting to find in Layton a prolific drinker or, at least, a body in heat have encountered a serious poet, an arrogant idealist and, in many respects, a conservative in the tradition of the self-made man. Whether Layton has ever been any of the characters he has paraded before the public is a question to be considered. For one thing, the seedy bars and succession of full-breasted women would not have left a great deal of time for some thirty-five books, as well as those which he has edited. Also, the somewhat hedonistic stereotype which is often projected for the benefit of the newspaper reader does not do justice to what is certainly one of the most wide-ranging minds in Canadian letters. This is not to say that Layton has “pranked” the public, though his sense of humour is constantly underestimated; nor is it to suggest that there is not a bit of truth behind each of the masks. It is merely to point out that the nature of Layton's personality is frequently as protean as many consider the bulk of his work to be.

Like Ken Kesey's powerful protagonist, McMurphy, Layton's “poet” does battle with the sterile forces of anti-life; though, with Layton, this can mean culture, gentility, castration, Xianity, the SS, technological society, and almost anyone living in Canada. The opponent is awesome: it has chloroformed mankind, driving those with vision to alcoholism, insanity, or suicide; it turns on anything that is sensitive or creative; and, lastly, it has made the Jew, both as person and as symbol, into an endangered species. What is curious is that Layton's identification with his poet is complete to the extent that they become interchangeable — from a boy pounding with a broom to order the chaos (if not the gods) to a man plugging the void with his phallus. The role of the public persona is an extension of Layton and/or his mythological poet, and must be viewed in the prophetic tradition; that Layton has often sensationalized this voice (not unlike Norman Mailer) is a technique that has proved functional in stirring the very people it is his vocation to reach.

It has often been said that Layton is a didactic poet. In an era of experimental virtuosity, this may not be entirely unhealthy; but, regardless of one's aesthetic bias, Layton has a vision, and will continue to articulate it. For the less perceptive reader, he offers the "Foreword": a prologue, or handbook of instructions, to prevent one from missing the point. It is ironic, given his conviction that what is being said is ultimately more important than the approval of academics, that Layton remains one of Canada's most misunderstood poets. It is as though people would rather discuss what they dislike about Layton than actually read his work: a practice accentuated by his rise to national and, now, international prominence.

It would be convenient, but to some extent untrue, to suggest that Layton considers the classroom a microcosm of the universe, or that he views his students as the members of a personal congregation. In fact, he is more interested in what his students think and have to say, and endeavours to maintain a low profile. Fortunately, this is quite incompatible with his personality — with the result that classes tend to be lively exchanges, frequently off the topic and often past the time. Toward the end of his 1977-78 graduate course on Montreal poetry, however, a rather unique situation presented itself: Irving Layton, in the role of teacher, lecturing on Irving Layton, the man and the poet. In this article, I have divided into three parts my notes from these lectures: the first section adding to the biographical record; the second, the artist on fourteen poems; and the third, an edited transcript of Layton's last class at York. The distinction between man, poet, and teacher is not so obvious in reality: a fact that should be evident in the third section.

It is interesting to note that Layton's vision has changed very little in the last couple of decades, that his current themes and stances amount to a progression of former insights into the nature of man and society. This exploration of fundamental problems in depth has produced what is easily the most unified body of poetry in Canadian literature. It has also resulted in the critical work of Wynne Francis and Eli Mandel remaining the best in the field; the latter's 1969 *Irving Layton* offers what is still the most complete perspective on Layton, and is helpful in coming to terms with even his most recent work. Future comparative studies might view the way in which Layton, Cohen, and Klein explore the post-Holocaust psyche of modern man, or investigate the differences between Layton's and Leonard Cohen's conception of the poet as Christ.

I should point out that, for the most part, in this article Layton has been allowed to speak for himself; only in the third section is a narrative framework provided, and that to underline the retrospective nature of the class. Layton's words have been left unchanged, as has the order of the poems taken up in the flow of discussion. Where repetition or duplication may be found, it has been allowed to stand in order to mark the poet's own points of emphasis. Lastly, I should like to

thank the other students in the course, whose leading questions gave Layton the range required to address with passion that which he has considered of significance in both his life and work.<sup>1</sup>

### *Biographical Notes*

Right. Early poetry was framed in Montreal, English and French Canada. I felt alienated: all my teachers were English, not Jewish. My home was poor. My father was a visionary, a scholar. He entertained angels, didn't give two shits for the kids — said about six words to me.

I was the youngest in the family. My mother couldn't spend too much time with us, maintaining the grocery store. She wanted us to be like Mrs. Steinberg's sons down the street. She had to cut off her hair and wear a hideous wig. My beautiful mother. It was traditional — to keep the husband's mind off his wife's beauty and on religious thoughts.

I rebelled very early against the piety and orthodoxy in the home. Refused to be bar mitzvahed, refused to say Kaddish when my father died. Strul Goldberg was the great influence on my life. He was the ideal I was supposed to look up to after the death of my father. He was successful — made a lot of money peddling religious articles. My father once said, "If you spit in his face, Strul would say it was raining."

It was so important to be living where we did — under that flat (a semi-brothel), surrounded by Poles, Italians. I got out of the city to the country market early with my mother: that's where I got my sense of colour and smell — great effect on my poetry. In school, I found out the English didn't live up to their "fair play" maxim. I got expelled — was in trouble from the day I was born. David Lewis lent me \$10.00 for my matriculation fee, introduced me to A. M. Klein. They were the famous debating team in Montreal; Lewis was the serious orator, Klein the great wit. Klein tutored me in Latin on the side of Mt. Royal.

I learned politics and literature in Horn's Cafeteria, frequented by Trotskyites, Stalinists, Socialists, and Communists. At the time, I was a member of the Young People's Socialist League, which was one of the tributaries of the CCF. Frank Scott used to come down and give lectures. There was little separating politics and literature then. In the thirties, Marxism was the dominant ideology: a good writer helped the revolution. I used to get on a soapbox in Fletcher's Field and give lectures on poetry, and on the revolution in factories. My girlfriend, Suzanne, a Communist, used to come down and yell all sorts of names at me — I had to know my stuff — then, after, we'd amorously get together. The early interest in politics gave me my life-long distaste for English gentility.

The best thing to happen was me going to Macdonald College instead of

McGill. I had to do a lot of science — and not just English. When I brought in a Communist to speak, I was harassed by the R.C.M.P. — even though I had also, a fortnight earlier, brought in the head of the Bank of Montreal. But the other students were worse. When I was in residence, they used to dump garbage on my bed and throw my books on the floor. Every day. I could never catch them. But the B.Sc. made me a well-rounded person, and you can see the agricultural images in my poems. I worked on farms for three or four summers, something significant for an urban Jew.

My first marriage was a disaster. I was an idealist and a Socialist. I married her because she was scarred. It was my way of coping with the injustices of the world. . . . Stupid.

So there's the picture. Early poems born of scorn, hatred, opposition, rebelliousness: all notes you find in my early poetry. The tremendous *joie de vivre* is from my mother. I can have the most morbid thoughts and not lose the *joie de vivre*. It has nothing to do with the brain, but everything to do with the physical constitution. So you get the two boats going in the same direction: with the rebelliousness, a celebration. I enjoy living — women, wine, sewers. Up until now I've had more than my share of disappointment, hardship, but it doesn't affect my temperament or joy. It's very Hebraic. No poet except the one in *Ecclesiasticus* has had such a sense of nullity. Very early the trick was to fill up the nothingness. You have to make up your own code and live by it. Never in my life have I been guided by externals. I've never been influenced by others. I fill up the void with my own idea of what's right and follow it.

In the later poems, there is a deeper note. The Holocaust really began to hit me about fifteen years ago. I began to meditate on what makes men so destructive to do such things. It becomes the black thread which runs through my poetry.

The "pole-vaulter" is Nietzsche's overman: to go beyond life. I don't believe in God, but I do believe in divinity. We know there's a divinity through truth, beauty, and creativity. This is what allows me to go on despite the records of Hitler, Stalin, etc. It doesn't matter: they come and go. Death takes them away in his green bags. Nobody escapes death and that's why I love it. Chance, Appetite and Death, are my three gods — they allow hope.

And then there's the unfairness of the cosmos, the poignancy, especially as it affects little creatures. Did I tell you the story of the kitten? Responsible for my first marriage and many other things? The most influential thing in my life. My cat gave litter to four kittens when I was a kid: one was crippled but it didn't know it. It would drag its inoperative hind legs trying to play with the others. He was so brave. I've never been able to resist someone being brave and defiant despite some great hardship. Even today, I am still vulnerable to this kind of situation. Hence, you find so many poems dealing with wounded birds, mosquitoes.

*Fourteen Poems*

## “Prologue to the Long Pea-Shooter”

This is a broadside against the literary establishment as it was in '52 or '53: a kind of academicism, an English sort. Dudek was not originally in, but was put in later on. Jasper Shittick is Sutherland, Bowell is Powell, a reviewer at the time for the *Montreal Star*; genteel, narrowminded, anti-erotic — he was representing the fashion of the time: puritanism. When he cut down a poet, it was a compliment — worth another two hundred books to be sold.

Here I'm having a good spoof, though there are serious parts. I'm attacking most people for being lousy readers. I'm also attacking other poets who would rather see a rival poet's book bomb than be successful as, at that point, the friendship comes to an end.

Second and third stanzas, I'm being ironic. Don't try for greatness, go for fame — people don't understand greatness. Be genteel: that's what the people wanted. Women were into romanticism, something to take them out of their modern homes. Then I attack the cultural philistines: the people who worship Eliot because everyone worships Eliot. In the fifth stanza, I'm ironically telling poets: despite the Holocaust, be genteel — write like Le Pan.

From “clergymen” on, in the last stanza, I attack culture in general. Someone should go through my stuff, prose too, and see my constant attack on culture. Torture, mutilations, beatings, never decreased attendance at operas. Culture is the great lie which enables people to forget, to live with, the atrocities of this age. The erudite cannibal of tomorrow will very likely be cultured. Retired clergymen ravage life to spiritualize. In a later poem, it's not chicken or fowl which inspires people, but the broken skull of a Jewboy. So far as I know, I am the only poet who has as a theme the infinite adaptability of people to live with a Holocaust.

## “Now That I'm Older”

The capacity for assimilating murderers' bullshit is limitless for people.

## “The Improved Binoculars”

What I am concerned with from the beginning is aggression. Man is condemned to be either creative or destructive. Since only a small minority is creative, the rest engage in destruction. It's an apocalyptic poem. Goethe, when he was dying, asked for more light — the irony in the poem. “Improved binoculars” is the symbol for modern technology.

## “The Executioner”

These poems are never picked up by genteel Canadians — they're European, Mediterranean. Europeans read my work and identify. I am a Canadian by accident of birth.

“My visitor . . . absence of theories”: a theme you’ll find in many of my poems. Very Kafkaesque, but I hadn’t read Kafka then. Another theme in my work: the contrast between the storm trooper and the genteel thinker — the visitor has no doubts. “We agreed . . . the condition . . . murder of others”: the condition of our century — we kill for someone else’s theory. We’ve arrived at a point where one man will kill another, not even knowing him, for a third man’s theory. The “executioner” is my symbol for the sensibility of the 20th Century.

“The Cage”

This is an important poem. The black irony, the humour, is maintained throughout. People will get together, love one another, as long as there is a victim. “Mythical cage”: Socialism, Communism, religion — any Utopia. The virtue of altruism is like an orgasm for them. The function of the half-holiday is to blind me. It takes something like that for people to see how much generosity there is in their souls.

“For Andrei Amalrik”

Another theme in my work: the forgone mediocritization of thought in everyone. Passion, original thought, is penalized. The unusual, the extraordinary, the unique, is being punished across the world — Russia, Poland, China. People will have to be chameleons if they want to be original.

“Elegy for Marilyn Monroe”

The odd, eccentric individual is persecuted almost as much in North America. The Russians send them to insane asylums; we make them crazy so they have to go on their own. Sexton, Plath, Lowell, Klein, commit suicide or go crazy in this world. Anyone who can see, anyone with talent, has to go. The pigmies are the commissars.

The sensitive original cannot kill: he has not fortified himself against others — hence, the helpless Jew. The person who can see is defenceless *because he can see*. The little man derives a great feeling of power from persecuting others and our society, technology, is making nothing but little men: elevator operators, secretaries, etc.

“At the Iglesia De Sacromonte”

An actual story — what Christianity has done to passion. Another theme: the contrast between pagan vitality and energy versus what religion has done to it.

“Icarus”

The difference between true poets, prophets, and false poets. The poet is Icarus; he doesn’t hang around cafés discussing literature. To be a poet is tragic. He’ll never make it, never get there, his wings will be melted, but the difference is that he’ll try whereas others won’t.

“Piazza San Marco”

Il Duomo is a magnificent structure in Venice. I’m saying that these people will never produce a cathedral like that again; instead, they have it hanging on medallions from their wrists. The diminution of modern man — mankind is no longer capable of the greatness which has produced such monuments. You have heroes from the Bible to the Renaissance, but downhill since then.

“The Mosquito”

Nature as a battlefield. Butterfly over a dead mosquito: a war is going on under the innocence of nature. “Crooked Star” is the Soviet star — I was then still somewhat of a Socialist. Bloodshed and star: my symbols for life — torture/death and illumination. Injustice, blind cruelty, defiance, illumination, gallantry, occur again and again in my poetry.

“Like A Mother Demented”

The most anti-Wordsworthian poem I have ever written: my vision of the cosmos. Note the black irony, the dark mocking vision. I’m answering the riddle of, Why man? Answer: nature needs an audience to see its tragedy. My verdict on man: “nature’s most murderous tool and accomplice.”

“The Poet Entertains Several Ladies”

First stanza: hunchback/deformity can throw a bigger shadow than anyone, ironically attracting children. Ugliness and beauty. “My dog . . . torn ear”: brutality, torture, mutilation, goes on all the time in nature. Second stanza: I accept the Heraclitean notion that all is flux, change, rotting driftwood. Beauty is momentary, flux forever. Humans discover this, but nature does it. Third stanza: mankind has a momentary radiance, but again nature, “My dog,” goes on. Fourth stanza: never resting, never ceasing . . . I am full of pity to all this. Fifth stanza: mind can touch memory, turning it into fire — poetry. “I,” the poet who puts bells on machinery. “My dog licks his bruised fur / paws his torn ear”: nothing overrides this fact — “bruised” is in for impact.

“Orpheus”

Here the savagery and the celebration are fused. The rebel statement: God is neither Christianity, nor Judaism — God is blood. The sexuality enables me to forget nature’s strife; look at “The Tamed Puma” in *The Covenant*. My favourite theme: men sing best when they are cruel. Human beings are very creative: they will pluck out your eyes; they will use your spasm to break their prison; they will kill out of love. The poet reconciles the death wish with the love wish — living with the reconciliation is like divinity.



*Last Class at York*

Enter Layton, five minutes late, looking like a Jewish Zorba. He sits down, belly protruding a little over his belt. "Right!" he says, "Last class . . . I believe we're still doing me." He gives the impression of a professional wrestler.

A discussion takes place on "coffee house" poetry. Layton summarizes, "Yes, it's a very good thing for suffering poets to get together, but there has to be a good poet or two among them; otherwise, the bad stuff will multiply. Look at the Montreal situation: Harris and Solway are besieged by bad stuff. You only get one or two good poets every ten years. What is happening now is quantity — inferior poets financed by the Canada Council. Harris has been around for a long time. Was in my class in 1967. Works hard on his craft. Produced a good book like *Grace*. Same with Solway — a master craftsman. They bring their poetry to Hottentots and are told it's not poetry. That's dangerous! At least in Russia they know who the good poets are — they put them in insane asylums. In North America, the good poet is swamped by mediocrity. In Russia, they know what good poetry is and stop it; in Canada, they trivialize it: surround the flowers with weeds and choke them. It's terrible. . . ."

Layton says this not so much in conversation, as trying to explain that something has gone wrong. The class has only started, and his adrenalin is pumping.

A student asks what he thinks of W. D. Snodgrass's essay, "Tact and the Poet's Force."<sup>2</sup> Layton listens to a passage, then offhandedly replies, "Snodgrass is being English and polite." It looks as though he's going to leave it at that, but then the tempo begins to build. "Tact is something a *minor* poet is concerned with. Can you imagine Milton, Dante, Shelley, talking about tact? Those bishops and those cardinals burning. It's context, not tact. In one context you overstate like Byron, in another you understate. I've never heard Pushkin talk about tact. 'Tact' has come into being because of minor poets like Snodgrass. The academics love it! Have you ever heard anyone getting excited about Snodgrass?"

Layton continues more calmly, "There are no rules to poetry, only contexts. The only thing is to be effective. Subtlety and vulgarity may be used at different times when necessary. You can't make a rule to be subtle all the time — look at Blake!"

The student unrolls another quotation, this time from Peter Hunt's "Irving Layton: Pseudo-Prophet":

The same cannot be said of 'Whom I Write For' which exemplifies a central defect in Layton's work. The very barbarism he deplores (at Hiroshima and in Nazi Germany) is present in his own vision and method:

I want you to feel as if I had slammed  
your child's head against a spike;  
And cut off your member and stuck it in your  
wife's mouth to smoke like a cigar.

He does not integrate the sense of moral shock with the description of the horrors he hates; rather he attempts to shock the reader by overt obscenity and sadism.<sup>3</sup>

Layton leans forward with his hands clasped together, and answers slowly and deliberately, "The man is not capable of understanding a poem or why it was written. Hunt is illiterate. When I talk about stuffing a man's penis into a woman's mouth, I'm shocking because I've seen it. When I write about Auschwitz, *am* I being as bad as the SS? My aim is to make people aware that they're living in an age of atrocity. I'm trying to tear away the veil of culture. In the Preface to my forthcoming book,<sup>4</sup> I talk about the self-horror it masks: man's hatred for life. Man has a hatred for sexuality because he cannot master it. He's arrogant. He wants to be God, Master of life, and — when he can't — he tries to rub it out.

"I'll tell you an interesting story. People have written reviews of my latest book,<sup>5</sup> some good and some bad. I went to an Italian Embassy party, because I wanted to say goodbye to my translator going on vacation, and see an Italian girl doing her M.A. thesis on me at Toronto. She tells me she's fascinated with my idea of a poet. I deal with it throughout my work. She says what she's really interested in in my later books is that Christ becomes the archetypal poet. It took an Italian woman to see something as plain as the crooked nose on my face! That Christ is the archetypal poet — he stands for love, creativity and, most of all, joy and laughter. All my poetry leads up to Jesus. Like him, I don't intend to be tactful!"

He turns to *The Covenant* and reads "Xianity." "Now how could anybody have missed this?" He is standing up, almost shouting. "It takes an Italian. . . ." Layton slams his book against the table, staring directly at the class. "How . . . ?"

He reads "For My Brother Jesus," gesturing theatrically with his free hand, then turns to "Christos-Dionysos" and "Magdalena," noting that "Yeats would have been happy to compliment me on these . . . I think." He sits down and reads "Disguises," "where I compress the Jewish experience into a lyric," as well as the poem "Bambino," which starts him off again.

"No theory can satisfy me — look at 'The Poet Entertains Several Ladies.' In order to understand me in North American poetry, you have to understand that I have broken all the rules consciously. I accept none of the Judaic, Christian, Canadian tenets. I've been attacking the anti-eroticism and philistinian element in Canada. Nobody likes to have their tenets questioned, much less violated — that's why the critics have been so hostile.

"I distrust the virtuous. I'm anti-ideological — Zionism, Communism, Socialism, Fascism — I'm opposed to all that. I'm concerned with the human soul. What the critics say can't hurt because I've said worse myself. They forget I had a mother who cursed me from the moment I got up. I've heard it all before. What I'm worried about is the damage to the spirit. Sometimes you have to shout, scream, kick someone in the ass, pour a bowl of urine on their heads, dump a

bathtub of shit, to get them away from their tact! If you feel very strongly about the dangers to the human spirit, you're not going to be tactful!

"What is it about the English that makes them talk like that? Snodgrass . . . You'll never find a Russian talking like that!" He calms down a little. "I'm sorry I lost my temper. It wasn't at you. It's just that I've been fighting this attitude all my life — in the thirties, in the forties — and it hasn't changed at all."

There is a long pause, a sort of vacuum after Layton's burst of energy. It becomes a question and answer period.

*Didn't someone do a survey, and found out you had the third largest vocabulary in English poetry?*

"I'm supposed to have a vocabulary of 21,000 words. Shakespeare had 31,000. Only Shakespeare and Milton have used more, and yet I am cited for using vulgar words."

*Do you see yourself influenced by Klein, and influencing Cohen? Is there a tradition of Montreal poetry?*

"There's a tradition insofar as we're all Jewish, but the tradition goes further back to the Old Testament. We're capable of drawing on that tradition. Jews throughout history in different nations and different cultures — you'd be a fool not to draw on it. What I say, any Jew will tell you that. Any Jew digging into his history. We've seen empires come and go. We're still here, they're not — some are on the way out. What a fantastic privilege to draw on that unique history. Kenneth Sherman and Eli Mandel are doing it now. In Mandel's latest book,<sup>9</sup> he's looking for his roots.

"In any other sense of a tradition — no. Klein and I disagreed on a lot of things. Klein was orthodox and had visions of getting ahead. The respectable lawyer and the bohemian. If anything, I and we — *First Statement* and *Preview* — influenced Klein. With Cohen . . . influence only in the sense that I kicked open doors for him to write about.

"Technically, there's hardly a poet in North America who I haven't influenced in some way. It took an American, Olson, to point it out. Canadian critics wouldn't understand it if you printed it on their cocks. But I had a disagreement with Williams: they wanted to reject everything, whereas I wanted to adapt it. . . . All Canadian poets have adapted the things I was doing in *Red Carpet for the Sun*."

*So you're trying to change the psyche of Canadians . . . ?*

"With *Red Carpet for the Sun*, I achieved an attack on Canadian culture. After that, I got into the soul — man is either a fallen angel or a risen devil. The problem is not sociological, political, or the price of coffee. The problem is man. I began to get into the darker aspects of the soul. Then in '66, '67, during the Six Day War when the extermination of the Jews — a remarkable people, not because I

am a Jew, any historian will tell you they've made more contributions to the world: art, medicine, etc. — anyway, that's when a turn happened. The world was ready to let the Jews be massacred. The genteel, religious West. Then the attack on culture sharpens.

"The academics who attack me today are financed by the Canada Council. The genteel academics . . . In the old days they were right from England, loud in attacking my vulgarity, 'tactlessness'; but they've all gone and have been replaced by Canadian academics. It brings the story up to date, and it will continue. Look at the reviews of my latest books. If you want a sensitive view, you have to go to a European, not an Anglo-Saxon."

*How do you reconcile the relation between Nietzsche and the Jewish tradition?*

"A tall point. Nietzsche did not influence me any more than D. H. Lawrence did, but they both had arrived at insights and feelings which I arrived at. And gave me more. Nietzsche's been far more a liberator than anyone, including Marx. Nietzsche attacks bourgeois culture. He is the greatest liberator.

"The Jew accepts the moral elite — I'm not saying the Jews are a chosen people — whereas I have improved upon it. I believe in divinity, not God: I rejected all that stuff when I was thirteen. The Overman is the man who goes beyond human nature — more soul and less asshole — and that's very close to Judaism. 'Ought' is the notion that the Jews gave the world. 'There ought to be justice' — Moses, Abraham, arguing with God, telling him he 'ought' to behave better. We are weak, we are fallible, but it's possible for us to attain divinity.

"So there's the theme of rebelliousness between Jewish history and Nietzsche: a dialogue with divinity. Any wonder why Stalin and Hitler hated the Jews? People who have argued with God, do you think a dictator's going to scare them? I smell the stink of the dead corpse while he's speaking. I'm a Jewish Nietzschean. I've said it before, but they've ignored it.

"The whole thing about the Overman is that he does not use violence. He's above it. And since there's been two wars against Germany, it's hopeless that the West will understand Nietzsche. Even Bertrand Russell didn't. Nietzsche's been called the prototype of Nazism, but read him! He has nothing but praise for the Jews — he attacks Germans! See his passages on anti-semites. But the stupidities, the nonsensicalities, are still being taught!"

Layton turns to "The Cold Green Element" in response to a student's request. He reads the last line slowly, triumphantly. "The 'cold green element' is my metaphor for life, my symbol for fecundity. The wind and the satellite represent change, flux. At the end of change is death, so I'm calling your attention to mortality. There's a reference to the A-bomb being dropped on Hiroshima. And then there's the poet who hangs like a Christ-figure, or victim, on the gate.

"The relation between the crowd and the poet is a theme I've always kept: they

go to see him tortured. The second image of the poet, someone who's been blasted by lightning because of his vision or revelations, is that he is crippled — the hunchback — and that goes back to 'The Poet Entertains Several Ladies.' I see my past selves as the leaves on a tree which will also eventually decay. There's an awareness of not being able to divide life and death.

"So the poem's about the poet in a Hiroshima world, an age of atrocities, but it also has old age and death. There's the Nietzschean/Dionysian note: robin chewing the worm. The ending is that you forget all your medical troubles when you hear children. Plus, 'breathless' is ambiguous.

" 'A Tall Man Executes A Jig' and the 'Pole-Vaulter' are two other significant poems. They're about redeemers: people who have experienced pain but don't whine."

*How do you see your work in the context of modern and contemporary poetry?*

"Modern poetry tends to be pragmatic, not metaphysical, due to Pound et al. Because of my background in philosophy, theology, and science, you hear a different note in my poetry. There's not a single poet in Canada who has my background in the sciences, so I find many of the poems of my contemporaries shallow. Another reason why much of my work runs contrary to contemporary poetry is because of my Jewish background and Hebraic literature. Anyone who is familiar with it will not be impressed with Camus and Sartre. Not after reading *Ecclesiasticus*. Exile is redemption — not Zionism. I don't think we've wandered as far as we have and done things that we have done to settle for a piece of land, an army, and an Air Force. I'm not against a homeland, but your Bellows, Cohens, etc., have that Jewish imagination which is the result of history and the Bible."

*Does that mean you have to be Jewish to be a great poet?*

Layton laughs. "Well, some poets have managed to survive the terrible handicap of not being Jewish. No, there are other great cultures, but the Jew is very fortunate. He writes out of time and space. He's been everywhere, and is aware of what goes on in the world. He carries with him his history. Isaac, Jacob, Moses, etc., are his contemporaries. My mother used to talk to them like they were members of the family. Same with God."

A student presents a seminar on Michael Harris, David Solway, and Bob McGee: contemporary Montreal poets. Twenty minutes later, Layton notes, "It's true that Harris and Solway — I don't know McGee — are repudiating us, but they've gone to a landscape/Archibald Lampman tradition. That's good, because they have to rid themselves of our influence and because they feel comfortable with it, but they'll have to watch out for the — and I know you're going to kill me when I say this — gentility. Excellent poetry, great poetry, but what are they saying? Where's the satire? That's what bothers me.

"Look — here's a poem I would like to see Harris and Solway write." Layton reads "News from Nowhere"<sup>7</sup> gesturing magnificently. "The poet has a public function to perform as a prophet." He turns to "The Happening" and announces, "Now there's a prophetic poem — it's not the proletarian, it's the castrated intellectual who is going to change the world." He reads the last of his new poems, "Flies," stating that it deals with man's aggressiveness and how it is turned into art: "The fly versus the death of a human being."

"If there's a continuing tradition in Montreal poetry, it's excellence. Harris and Solway are genuine poets: they'll have ulcers, hemorrhoids, troubled marriages, but what I don't want to see watered out is the prophecy you find in Klein, me, Page, and Scott. That's the real Montreal tradition! Stress on craft, being naked, Harris and Solway have all the good things, but it bothers me that they're dealing with things handed down from Lampman.

"We've come full circle from Lampman to Harris and Solway. Tying the country to the mind is 19th-Century. The tradition of Montreal poetry, the other half, is a public one — a concern with the world out there, not navel-gazing. You get a tradition of social awareness, not social realism because the Russians have bastardized that. There's less emptiness in Harris and Solway because they've suffered, but still the poet has that public element they have to keep in mind. When the poet becomes too arty-farty, he's in trouble. Especially in these times.

"It's the prophetic tradition you should shoot for. The good poet always speaks for his generation. . . ." Layton looks down at his watch and realizes he has gone into overtime. "Look, I'd like you all to come over to my place for an evening. We'll have some wine, good conversation. . . . How about it?" He writes the class into a black pocketbook, stuffs his briefcase, and heads for the door, long hair flowing in a white mane.

## NOTES

- <sup>1</sup> The other students were Maria Jacobs, Jack Urowitz, J. Kertes, and Nancy Gay Rotstein. The lectures in question took place in March 1978, the last class being on the 29th of that month.
- <sup>2</sup> W. D. Snodgrass, *In Radical Pursuit* (New York: Harper & Row, 1975); the passage begins with the last paragraph on page 12, and concludes at the end of Jarrell's poem, "Protocols," page 13.
- <sup>3</sup> Peter Hunt, "Irving Layton, Pseudo-Prophet — a Reappraisal," *Canadian Poetry*, 1 (Fall/Winter 1977), p. 5.
- <sup>4</sup> Irving Layton, *The Tightrope Dancer* (Toronto: McClelland & Stewart, 1978); a number of identical phrases would suggest that Layton was very close to the manuscript of this volume at this time.
- <sup>5</sup> Irving Layton, *The Covenant* (Toronto: McClelland & Stewart, 1977).
- <sup>6</sup> Eli Mandel, *Out of Place* (Erin: Press Porcépic, 1977).
- <sup>7</sup> The poem was later published in *Droppings from Heaven* (Toronto: McClelland & Stewart, 1979).